

A tool for the (prayer) tool box Meanderings of the mind

Introduction

Prayer is a spiritual discipline that is central to our personal spiritual well-being. Richard Foster gives an incredibly powerful image of the importance of prayer in this one short sentence ... *“Prayer catapults us onto the frontier of spiritual life”!* By the simple act of starting out on a prayer, we are thrown right into the midst of Christian spirituality. Foster goes on to emphasize the importance of just getting started (on a prayer session) ... or to borrow a phrase from arguably one of the world’s most successful marketing campaigns ... *“Prayer ... Just do it!”*

If asked the question – prayer – where do we start? How would we respond to that? What are some basic rules and guidelines to follow?

Well, there may be some rules and guidelines for prayer, but the best answer to the question/s above ... ***RULE NUMBER ONE – there are no rules!***

Prayer does have the potential to become a spiritual burden. If we are not careful we can build for ourselves a guilt complex of not doing our prayer job well. There are many dimensions of prayer of course, but one that can be really liberating is ... prayer is listening.

*“A man prayed and at first he thought that prayer was talking. But he became more and more quiet until in the end he realized that **prayer is listening**”*

“Celebration of Discipline”: Richard Foster p 48

Richard Foster’s thoughts on prayer being framed around the meanderings of the mind may be helpful here. The meanderings technique without a doubt, would have to be one of the best pieces of advice on prayer that I have ever received. How many of us have ever experienced something like this?

*... I recognize that I am not all that great in my prayer life ... I want to quite intentionally try to better at it ... I set aside some time for prayer and away I go. Part way through this prayer time my mind has completely wandered, to a point of forgetting that I was meant to be praying ... even to a point of dozing off. I now feel completely reinforced in the view that **YES I am lousy at this prayer stuff ... my immediate guilt feelings have been further amplified.***

Here is a little practical test to prove a point about the meanderings of the mind. Set aside thirty seconds. During that time close your eyes and try to have absolutely no thoughts in your mind.

... how did you go?

Most of us fail dismally at this task. Invariably there are distractions and our mind wanders. Usually there are sounds to distract us and prompt thoughts through recognition of the sounds. Try as hard as we like, it is difficult to shut the mind down.

“One of the greatest obstacles in prayer is the activity of our minds.” (*God of surprises*: Gerard Hughes p 42)

The great thing about the meanderings technique is that it gives us a license to wander – to use the meanderings of the mind to actually be the power source of our prayer!

Here are the basic steps involved in this technique:

1. We intentionally acknowledge that we are in God’s presence. This can be done quite formally if you wish, even by using the invocation; I begin this time of prayer / meditation / conversation with God - In the name of the Father, The Son and the Holy Spirit. Alternatively if you prefer, it can be quite informal – Hey God here I am – ready to listen to what you have to say to me; top have a conversation with you.
2. At that point we do nothing further. We sit and wait. We actually allow the mind to wander.
3. After a period of time, we eventually will come back into conscious reality recognizing that we are in this time of prayer. We recollect where our mind wandered to – then construct a very short prayer to pay attention to the subject matter of our meandering. Verbalize to God exactly what we have been thinking.
4. Then we sit and wait again, effectively repeating the exercise. Invariably the big things on our mind often worrying things will come up as we meander. We systematically deal with those things with successive short prayer petitions. Sometimes the same things will come up again. We might then pray something like ... *“Hey Lord this is obviously a big thing ... I really need your help with this and unload it on you and ask that you help me navigate through the problem ...*
5. Eventually it is possible that we will “run out of steam” – even nod off – not a good thing if using the prayer technique while driving!
6. Just let it happen – wander off – allow yourself to be miles away. You don’t have to have any guilt feelings about wandering. Systematically hand things over to God as they come back into your conscious realm of the prayer context. It is OK to have negative feelings and even be angry with God – tell it as it is. There is no point pretending in prayer before God, who knows us better than ourselves anyway!

Have fun meandering with God!

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(Adapted from the work and teaching of Gerard Hughes, Richard Foster and John Kleinig.)